

***Naagins, Daayans, Chudails* in Contemporary Indian Popular Imagination**

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Abstract

This article analyses the representation of supernatural beings like *naagins*, *chudails*, *daayans* in the hugely popular mainstream Indian television entertainment programmes in the context of gender and the way they are perceived in contemporary Indian popular culture. This is juxtaposed with the numerous instances of lynching, burning and violence experienced commonly by women who are accused of being witches in Indian society even today, as reported in the newspapers. The dichotomy that emerges between the reality reported in the newspapers and the televisual representations deserves a close study as it reflects on the dominant perceptions of women in Indian society. This article also compares and contrasts these beings with supposedly supernatural powers with the way such women are projected in the Western media and popular culture.

Keywords: Television serials, witches/*daayans*/*chudails*, women's representation, gender, violence against women

We saw the eye-catching posters assaulting our collective vision with a splash of red and a long, snake-like plait or *choti* that belonged to a nubile woman staring enigmatically at the viewer. Lacking the usual paraphernalia, the poster did not seem to be for a typical horror tele-film or serial like *Lal Ishq* or *Fear Files* that are generally shown late at night. The poster was for *Nazar*, a new prime time Hindi language programme telecast during time slots generally reserved for the ever popular *saas bahu* soaps. Matched with the TRP chart favourite *Naagin* (which, like its

namesake, reappears in newer versions with predictable regularity ever since its phenomenally successful first run), it was a powerful reminder of the mainstreaming of a figure that used to be a staple of the horror genre earlier. Shape-shifting snake women and witches, the closest English synonyms for *daayan* and *chudail*, the terms commonly applied to such individuals in north India, used to be a part of the horror genre with a devoted audience that remained impervious to the vicissitudes of time and changing tastes.

But currently, these creatures of folk culture (Goodare, 2013)¹ who used to be a part of a niche genre have suddenly become ubiquitous on mainstream Hindi entertainment channels, with Ekta Kapoor's soap factory leading the charge with the chart-topping *Naagin I, II III, IV, V* and *VI* as well as *Brahmrakshas*, *Lal Ishq* et al. Ekta Kapoor's ability to unabashedly pander to popular tastes is seen as a crucial factor responsible for her astounding success. Therefore, if she turns these denizens of Indian folk culture into staples of mainstream television experience, then the *naagins*, *daayans* and *chudails* have definitely arrived, as have their male counterparts, although to a lesser degree.

Anyone who chooses to study popular culture² will be compelled to wonder about the reason behind this move from the periphery to the centre of an entity that has complex associations in the Indian socio-cultural context. So, dismissing the emergence of such characters in popular culture just as flights of fantasy³ may be problematic, as, for many Indians, these creatures—the vengeful cobra reincarnating as a human being to take revenge—and witches in particular, are not figments of imagination, they are real.

There is compelling evidence with regard to the superstitious dread that witches evoke in a segment of Indian society in the form of the headlines that routinely appear in national dailies. For instance, one news report in the *Hindustan Times* informs, "Jharkhand tops in witch-hunt murders, 523 women lynched between 2001 and 2016: NCRB" (*HT*, December 3, 2017). It is apparently socially acceptable in some parts of India to burn, lynch, rape and humiliate anyone accused of practising witchcraft to neutralize their supposedly malignant power, as these headlines testify. For a student of popular culture, such news items beg a question—what is the correlation between the contemporary Indian society's superstitious fears of the witches, who in reality are brutalized,

burnt and lynched in different parts of the country as opposed to the televisual representations of the glamorous, eroticized creatures that seem to be mesmerizing the Indian public. This glaring discrepancy in the actual practice with regard to witches and their televisual representation deserves a closer investigation. We get a sort of answer to this question, as explained by Rosemary Jackson (1981), who states that, "by removing the limitations of reality, fantasy opens stories to the **possibility of anything** for its creators" (p. 6)⁴. So, the creators of these programmes conveniently dismiss the ugly reality about the treatment of witches in contemporary India, but get to add a pleasurable frisson of terror by introducing *daayans* and *naagins* while peddling the usual fare of extended families with enormous wealth, cherry-picked versions of 'Indian culture,' kitchen politics and *sanskars*.

Before we venture into an exploration of the contemporary tele-versions of the *naagins* and witches, a brief look at the terms *daayan*/*chudail*, used more or less interchangeably, may be helpful. A Bill presented to the Indian Parliament in 2010 explained that, "'witchcraft' means any act of magic, casting spells or sorcery or voodoo or black magic which is practised with a view to help or harm other persons."⁵ Witches therefore, are individuals, mostly women, who, according to popular perception, endanger the life and property of others by practising black arts. They are supposed to be detrimental to the well-being of society and other human beings and therefore, in need of being controlled and curbed by all sorts of means. According to some accounts, *chudail* is an old hag. It is generally believed in India that a woman becomes a *chudail* if she dies in childbirth or due to neglect; while a *daayan* is supposed to be a victim of exploitation and is supposed to be beautiful enough to lure men to their death. Both are supposed to practise black arts and can change shape. In popular imagination, they have reversed feet and their power resides in their long hair. The gaze/*nazar* of these creatures is supposed to cast evil spells, hence the name of the serial.

Before we explore the conundrum of the astounding popularity of the fictional *chudails/daayans*, we also need to look at the attitude that Indian society at large displays towards witches. One aspect that becomes immediately clear is that for many people, witches are real, not fictional. A random survey of news gives us numerous incidents connected to witches in different parts of India,⁶ most often from Jharkhand, Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Assam. All the reports

about witches are about women being beaten, stripped, raped, burnt, killed or lynched by villagers for being witches. In these regions, a widespread and persistent belief in witchcraft grants social sanction to such persecution of anyone accused of practising black arts on the pretext of protecting the society from malefic influence wielded by the witches.⁷ An overwhelming majority of these so-called witches / *daayans* / *chudails* are women, although a few men and even children have been accused of practising black arts.

According to Illes (2010), witchcraft refers “to the practice of, and belief in, magical skills and abilities which are believed to influence the mind, body, or property—of others in a malicious manner. Being connoted as well as contextualized negatively, it is more prominently visible in societies whose religio-cultural framework incorporates reverence towards mysterious super-natural realms” (as cited in Alam & Raj, 2018, p. 125). Taking this further, Alam and Raj note that, “Alleged to be the instigating instrument for diseases, physical deformities, famine, bad crops, deaths and other non-favourable stances; witchcraft is purported to be the ... intervention of negative supernatural powers” (p. 125). Most victims of witchcraft, according to them, are convinced that witches “use magical powers to ‘attack the fertility capacity of humans, cause harm to domestic animals, destroy crops, fly through night to engage in cannibalism, incestuous acts, assume animal form, etc.’ They are also perceived to cause misfortune, sickness, and even death by casting ‘evil eye’” (p. 125). This explains the title *Nazar* for a television programme with a witch as the central character.

Sociologists consider these reports as evidence of gender violence committed by powerful men of the community against women. According to sociologists, this instituting of power of one section of the community (men) to declare the other section of the community (women) as witches was propounded to be an essential part in the process of establishing the ‘authority of men and denunciation of women.’ This transition coupled with systematic exclusion of women from all major spheres of religious activities, suspension of land rights, and gender struggles in the realms of rituals, symbols, meanings, inheritance systems, etc., resulted in socio-religious devaluation of women, which over the period of time paved the path for the prominent visibility of andro-centric dominance in all realms of public and personal life (Nathan et al., 1998, as cited in Alam & Raj, 2018, p. 128).

Another related fact that needs to be taken into consideration at this point is that in the contemporary Indian context, such persecution of witches most often is influenced by non-superstitious reasons. Very often, women are branded as witches by the *ojhas* (witch doctors) for mercenary/material gains; to deprive them of property; deny them rights; and occasionally, as punishment for refusing the sexual advances of powerful men. There is nothing superstitious about such abuse of women, but a cynical exploitation of the society's religious-cultural beliefs for personal gains. When we look at the television entertainment programmes in this light, we can detect some interesting, but not surprising patterns. The real life 'witches' are powerless, exploited and oppressed. So, why are the feminists not celebrating the spectacle of their elevation to star status in the reel world? The occasional claims by the producers and writers of these tele-serials about empowering women through their programmes give a lie to the reality of their representation of women. Most of these programmes characterize witches and *naagins* alike as reinforcers, not subverters of the hegemony of the patriarchal culture, which is the dominant narrative in most regional language television entertainment programmes. Indian feminists have routinely castigated these programmes to be regressive in so far as they pander to the most discriminatory social practices with regard to women.

For one thing, the small screen witches in Hindi programmes are not path-breaking feminist characters; each of them derives from either cinema (*Nagina*, *Nagin*, *Nigahein*, *Jaani Dushman*, *Hiss*, *Ek thi Daayan*, etc.) or some international entertainment source. The primary motive behind making these programmes is clearly not a commitment to gender equality, but strictly commercial. Witches, like all the other television characters, provide escapist fare to the audience and are so much fodder to fatten the bank accounts of the producers. Seen from the media theory perspective, these programmes provide a complex interplay between the uses and gratification theories, insofar as they provide an escape from the unpleasant reality of daily life while providing generously lashings of glamour, suspense, romance and thrills. But one can also see the transactional element of media effects, as both the producers and consumers or the senders and receivers of these messages influence each other for their mutual benefit by reinforcing the consumers' existing beliefs (Valkenburg et al., 2016, p. 327). If one looks at the favourite witchy characters of the current crop of Hindi television programmes,

they seem to be more exotic versions of a regular tele-vamp. The eroticized, over the top presentation, complete with cakey, highly sought after very fair make up, coloured contact lenses, exaggerated eyes and eyelashes, Christmas tree accessories and over embellished clothes, plastic, botoxed faces make these characters glamorous and aspirational. The added advantage of their being creatures of fantasy is that it allows the makers even greater liberty with logic and rationality than they do otherwise. Imagine the shot of a lizard tattoo on the sexily clad back of a woman who then turns into a real lizard as seen in the promo of a serial called *Daayan*; computer-generated, colour-coded reptiles in the various versions of *Naagin* fighting with equally fake peacocks, mongoose and bees using all the tricks of a martial art guru, and then turning into desirable human beings at will.

The aspirational/desire aspect that is so inextricably linked to the popularity of the tele-serials is a significant part of the astounding popularity of these shows that seem completely devoid of logic in their convoluted plots. On the one hand, these serials claim to give agency and voice to the voiceless (presumably the poor terrified women who are regularly persecuted as witches in various parts of India), as the primary motive behind the actions of these tele-witches is supposed to be revenge for the wrongs done to them or their defenceless family members, mostly mothers. On the other hand, these programmes also show how these mysterious, powerful, frightening entities get humanized and defanged. The cruel, vengeful *naagin* or *chudail* gets domesticated in the prosperous, upper caste set up of all extended television families and slowly turns into a domestic goddess, who is the embodiment of patriarchal ideal of selfless femininity, who voluntarily sacrifices all for love, like a typical tele-serial heroine; while her adversary, who is generally another supernatural/fantasy character, represents the unreformed version of the same.

In most serials, like a stereotypical vamp, she wreaks havoc, creates drama and conflict and in the end, is defeated by the good, reformed witch, who is the protagonist. The series generally ends with the victory of good over evil and the social order is restored. If the series ends in tragedy as some versions of the *Naagin* series have done, then the good witch proves her credentials as a reformed witch, who is now an embodiment of the feminine ideal of sacrifice for the greater good. The notable fact about the supernatural/fantasy programmes is

that the *naagin/chudail/daayan* must either be totally humanized (thus, neutralized) or be controlled and deprived of her power to threaten the social order.

One oft-cited reason for the astronomical success of these programmes may be that they provide an escape from the mundane reality of our existence. Rosemary Jackson (1981) insightfully explains: "Fantasy is not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental. It has to do with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar and apparently 'new' absolutely 'other' and different" (p. 8). So, can one say that the current popularity of witches, *naagins* and *chudails* is yet another fad that will pass when something new captures the fickle fancy of the television audience? Or does the vengefulness of the *naagin* represent a wish fulfilment for the oppressed women under patriarchy? Or do the humanization/feminization, and thus neutralization of the witch represent a latent desire to control all inimical forces that threaten human, specifically patriarchal, society's status quoist tendencies? In this context, it is also pertinent to cite a sociological study which claims that "Belief in witches may be sign ... of an inability to dissociate reality and from fantasy" (Waskull & Eaton, 2018, p. 5). However this claim is contested by folklorists, who suggest that the belief in supernatural serves a moral function and teaches the believers to stay away from violence, cruelty etc. So, the ambivalence associated with the witches and their cohort continues to be a prominent part of their popular perception.

Another point that deserves attention is that cultures all over the world have believed in the existence of witches. For instance, in addition to the most notorious European text on witchcraft, *Malleus Mallificarum* (Heinrich Kramer, 1487) there are numerous examples in the Elizabethan and Jacobean literature that are rife with references to these evil creatures, such as Shakespeare's three witches in *Macbeth* and *Demonologie* written by King James I being notable evidences of the English society's obsession with witches. The Christian Church's well documented advocacy of the burning of witches on stakes and the Salem Witch trial in New England in 1692 are well known examples of the persecution of witches.

However, with the feminist movement gaining ground, a dramatic shift in the social perception of witches appeared in mid-twentieth century

America. In *The Witch in History*, Diana Purkiss (1996) explains how the witch myth that has admirers among certain sections is that of a wise woman who lives in harmony with nature and uses it to heal others. Her autonomy and independence pose a threat to men; her mystical belief system that derives from pre-Christian pagan faiths is an anathema to the Church and thus, she must be punished to maintain the hegemony of dominant order. There is fascinating evidence that Purkiss cites to affirm this change in the fortunes of modern witches that also gets reflected in the popular programmes on television. Purkiss explains that when the the 'action wing' of New York Radical Women was formed in 1968, they chose a striking new name for themselves, that is, WITCH. Describing witches, the collective wrote:

They bowed to no man, being the living remnant of the oldest culture of all one in which men and women were equal sharers in a truly cooperative society before the death-dealing sexual, economic, and spiritual oppression of the Imperialist Phallic Society took over and began to destroy nature and human society..... These examples, however, stand for the extraordinary flexibility of the term 'witch' as a signifier within all feminist discourse. Constantly cast and recast as the late twentieth century's idea of a profeminist, a sister from the past, the witch has undergone transformations. (Purkiss, 1996, pp. 8-9)

This reworking of the witch myth in American popular culture continues till date. *Bewitched*, a popular television series in the 1960s presented the witch heroine as mischievous, enchanting and far from threatening. In the 1990s, there was a resurgence of interest in the figure of the witch, when *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the three witch sisters of *Charmed* took the American mainstream television by storm. In each of these series, the witch was almost like the comic book superhero who saved the world from demonic forces, while living seemingly ordinary, unremarkable lives among regular people who were unaware of the super powers of the witches. These witches, far removed from their original, demonic origins, were forces of good leading ostensibly 'normal' lives like their non-witchy neighbours and friends. In addition to their glamour and goodness, these witches represent the normalization or appropriation of the witch by the mainstream society in popular discourse, thereby demystifying their powers and effectively defanging them.

However, Indian popular culture has its own compulsions and dynamics. Over the past thirty years, Indian epics, myths and legends have been consistently among the most watched television programmes, unlike the West where science fiction has been more popular. So, it is not surprising to see the witch with all the mythical powers that legends and folklore ascribe to her, attaining star status among the Indian audience. What is interesting is that in the Indian context, the television witch gets routinely appropriated by the patriarchal forces as she either chooses to give up her supernatural powers for the sake of love like any idealized female character, or is destroyed, at least for the time being by the dominant forces of human society; thereby reinforcing the superiority of humanity over other-worldly entities.

Another interesting dimension is that *naagins* in Hindu mythology are semi-divine like *yakshas*, *gandharvas* and *daityas*. They are the keepers of wealth and are associated with both Shiva and Vishnu; quite unlike the shape-shifting snakes or witches in the West who have demonic origins. In Hinduism, there is no equivalent to the Satan of Judaeo-Christian tradition, from whom the witches were supposed to originate. Whereas in the Indian context, witches derive from folk culture and have otherworldly associations that are bound to human existence. The tele-witch represents the seductive other, whose insidious charm poses a danger to an unwitting human being; a being who is more appealing, more powerful, and therefore, more dangerous. Her threat lies in her deceptive surface appeal, which seduces the unwary into becoming her accomplice in wicked deeds. She has beauty, an irresistible charm and power; who wouldn't want this in a world that is becoming increasingly materialistic and amoral? On the other hand, some members of the audience may see these witchy fables as lessons in morality, in which after many thrilling and scary encounters, good finally conquers evil, whether embodied by human beings or witches.

Notes

1. "Folklore witch is deemed to be a category separate from the demonic and village witch. "A folklore witch was not necessarily a criminal, was indeed not necessarily human...."p. 8.
2. Raymond Williams' many definitions of popular culture range from "well-liked by many people;" to 'inferior kinds of work; work deliberately setting out to win the favour with the people; culture actually made by the people for themselves." pp. 198-199.

3. Abrams explains that in a “fantasy—an explicit attempt is made to render plausible the fictional world” and “a genre of **fiction** that concentrates on imaginary elements (the fantastic). This can mean magic, the supernatural, alternate worlds, superheroes, monsters, fairies, magical creatures, mythological heroes—essentially, anything that an author can imagine outside of reality. With fantasy, the magical or supernatural elements serve as the foundation of the plot, setting, characterization, or storyline in general.” p. 279.
4. “Fantasy... is an enormous and seductive subject. Its association with imagination and with desire has made it an area difficult to articulate or to define, and indeed the value of fantasy has seemed to reside in precisely this resistance to definition, in its free-floating and escapist qualities... fantasies have appeared to be ‘free’ from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts: they have refused to observe unities of time, space and character, doing away with chronology, three dimensionality and with rigid distinctions between animate and inanimate objects, self and other, life and death....’ p. 6.
5. Retrieved from <http://164.100.47.4/billstexts/lbills/lbills/asintroduced/903ls.pdf>
6. Iqbal “Witch Hunting: A Case of Gender Violence in the Garb of Vigilantism in India.” “According to the National Crime Record Bureau, Jharkhand accounts for 54 out of 160 cases of murders where women were killed in the name of witch hunting in 2013 and a total of 400 women have been murdered with the same motive since the state was formed in 2001.” pp. 116-117.
7. Riya Ranjan, “Considered a general social threat for the community at large, hunting of witches to rid the community of the evil influence was deeply ... ingrained in the traditions.”

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